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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001220

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TAGS: PGOV KISL PREL AG  
SUBJECT: MYSTIC SUFI: BOUTEFLIKA'S ISLAMIC GAMBIT

REF: ALGIERS 651

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1. (C) SUMMARY:** As he did prior to his 2004 reelection, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has begun raising the profile of Algeria's Sufi religious schools -- the zaouias -- both as a tool for political mobilization and to counter Islamic extremism with a moderate, homegrown alternative. Within Islam, the zaouias are a flashpoint for controversy, part of a saint-like tradition that irritates and attracts Muslims on both sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide and dates back to the very origins of Islam itself. Much like an Islamic Order of Masons, Sufism persists in North Africa as a quiet and time-worn means of social organization, one of very few forces still able to bind together a tribal Algerian society atomized by the terrorism of the 1990s and the desperation of youth today. Bouteflika, himself an adherent of the Tidjania zaouia of Tlemcen, has embraced the religious hot potato that is Sufism as his primary religious strategy to counter the extreme and imported Salafism that has attracted new recruits to Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). While hitching his star to the zaouias has proven effective in bringing Bouteflika political gain, it is less clear that his strategy has kept extremism at bay, particularly as Bouteflika seems to move the zaouias into the spotlight only around presidential election season. END SUMMARY.

A DISCREET BROTHERHOOD NOW MAKING HEADLINES

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**¶2. (C)** A November 4 International Symposium of the Tidjania brotherhood, a Sufi seminar organized under Bouteflika's auspices, gathered some 400 participants from a dozen countries in the restless eastern oasis town of El Oued (reftel). While it is rare to read about the zaouias in the Algerian press, the conference made front-page headlines in several French-language newspapers, including the official state mouthpiece, El Moudjahid. According to the personal speech Bouteflika sent to the event, "Sufism is a way to salvation in a disappointing world of globalization," and thus the Tidjania zaouia "has a mission to fulfill." The Tidjania zaouia, like Bouteflika himself, is of uncertain Moroccan or Algerian origin. Founded in Fes in 1790 by religious scholar Ahmed Tidjani, Algeria claims its current headquarters is in Adrar, while Morocco believes it remains in Fes. Like many other zaouias, the Tidjania network extends throughout North Africa, through the Sahara and down into Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali and beyond.

RECONCILING ISLAMIC SAINTS AND ANTI-COLONIALISM

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¶13. (C) Historically, Sufi zaouias emerge around a holy man, or marabout, who acquires a following in life and the trappings of sainthood after death. The very concept of sainthood, or of any mortal approaching the divine, is anathema to the hardline Wahabi and Salafi versions of Sunni Islam to the east, which provide the theological underpinnings of Al-Qa'ida. Since Algeria's independence in 1962, the Muslim Scholars Association (Ulema) has strongly fought zaouia influence, with notable Ulema Cheikh Ben Badis denouncing zaouias as "a serious deviation from Islam," and worshipping the Sufi saints "a serious affront to God's uniqueness." Meanwhile, the Sufi zaouias also have strong historical ties to Shi'a Islam. During the Fatimid caliphate (909-1171 AD) -- the only period of Shi'a rule in North Africa -- Sufi culture was also exploited for political purposes, as the Shi'a tradition of respecting the most learned Islamic scholars meshed comfortably with Sufi "maraboutism." Many Sunni Muslims across North Africa worry to this day that the persistence of the zaouias will one day sow the seeds for a Shi'a resurgence from within, led by Iran.

¶14. (C) The Sufi zaouias have retained their role at the center of Algerian society in spite of repeated efforts to eliminate them. In the 1970s President Houari Boumediene sought to marginalize and contain their political influence, seeing them as archaic. During the 1990s, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its militant cousin, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), routinely attacked the zaouias and killed their leaders. With Bouteflika's election in 1999, however, the zaouias began to witness a revival that became

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more pronounced prior to his 2004 reelection and have become more relevant during his second term. As El Watan journalist Adlene Meddi told us recently, Bouteflika "found religion" following his grave illness in 2005, and began to see his Sufi faith as more than just an expedient political bridge across rival Islamic sects.

¶15. (C) The Sufi zaouia tradition, while present throughout the region, has its North African epicenter in western Algeria. Government offices in Oran, which in Algiers would feature exclusively the portrait of Bouteflika, display prominent photos or paintings of Emir Abdelkader, the Sufi marabout from Oran who led the fight against the French in the 1830s and 40s -- and became a Freemason in 1864. During our October 20 visit to Oran, Mayor Saddek Benkada, also a historian, explained the huge significance of the Sufi zaouia tradition in Algerian society. He observed that the zaouias dotting the western Algerian landscape have always been a primary tool for mobilizing the population. Through messages passed by the zaouias, western Algerians rallied to chase the Spanish from Oran's coasts in 1792, Benkada explained, and then Abdelkader used them to organize the fight against the French. As a result, he said, the zaouias are more powerful and more concentrated in those areas where the anti-colonial fight was strongest -- in his view, the west, where Algeria is closest to Europe. Although they try to remain apolitical, Benkada said that it was impossible for the zaouia brotherhoods to hide their political force, "particularly under Bouteflika."

USING WESTERN SUFISM TO UNITE ALGERIA

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¶16. (C) During the three-day El Oued symposium, participants debated Sufi mysticism and the "triptych" of knowledge, work and belief, which makes up the backbone of Sufi thought. The conference unsurprisingly concluded with a recommendation for a Tidjania renewal, to consolidate its ties and develop its connections throughout the world. The Tidjania zaouia, while centered in western Algeria, boasts tens of millions of followers across the globe. Known for a moderate and tolerant brand of Islam, Tidjania's current spiritual leader, Cheikh Mohamed Laid Tidjani, emphasized in closing that "all

members should work for a synergy of skills in order to revive the beacon of forgiveness and dialogue" within Islam.

¶ 17. (C) According to political analyst Rachid Grim, "Algerians are naturally attracted to the zaouias, because there they practice a type of Islam they know and like." Even among the inhabitants of big cities, who are not as exposed to the zaouias as their rural counterparts in the bled (countryside), most Algerians visit the "family zaouia" on regular occasions. For most Algerians, first exposure to the Qur'an comes not in a mosque but in extra-curricular time spent at a zaouia. Moreover, in many small cities and villages, the settlement of family and financial conflicts takes place not in courts but at the hands of the cheikh of the local zaouia, who, more than the mayor, is the key influential figure at the local level.

SUNNI BY DAY, SUFI BY NIGHT

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¶ 18. (C) Grim added that the zaouias have "always been used to counterbalance political Islam and outsiders," a fact that represents a source of fear and concern for the Algerian authorities. Because an Algerian's affiliation with a zaouia is not advertised and rules for political and social Islam are not clearly defined in Algeria, Grim said, zaouias may "overstep" into the political arena. El Watan journalist Salima Tlemcani followed Bouteflika during the 2004 presidential campaign. She told us recently that Bouteflika's focus on the zaouias leading up to the elections was "systematic," as he stopped "at every zaouia in his path, bringing suitcases full of cash to donate," showing respect and humility towards zaouia leaders, and visiting the mausoleums of deceased Sufi marabouts. Said Tlemcani, "he openly asked their for their blessing and political support at each stop."

COMMENT: HOPING HIS LUCK DOESN'T RUN OUT

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¶ 19. (C) With the rise of Al-Qa'ida-style extremism, Bouteflika's government has relied on the zaouias to play the

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card of tolerance and dialogue while exploiting his personal version of Sufi Islam for political gain. As a political choice, the Sufi zaouias are a potent part of the Algerian identity, one of very few that can transcend religious and tribal lines. The problem with pitting the zaouias against Salafism and AQIM, as expressed by journalist Tlemcani, is that Bouteflika only highlights the zaouias "in election season" whereas the fight against extremism is a constant struggle. While betting on the ancient Sufi mystic tradition may seem ironic for a president who stated upon election that "Islam should be open to universality and modernity," lately Bouteflika has succeeded in rehabilitating and activating the zaouias once again, for social and political influence. In March 2008, Cheikh Zouhir, president of the National Association of Zaouias in Algeria (ANZA), issued a statement openly inviting Bouteflika to run for a third term -- a statement that reached the most distant corners of Algerian society through the zaouia network. "Thanks to him," Zouhir wrote, "the zaouias have regained their position in society."

Having the zaouias on his side can only help Bouteflika maintain his grip on his political base in advance of the 2009 presidential elections.

DAUGHTON